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Whose Reality Counts? Participatory Poverty Assessments in Africa¹

Robert Chambers

A Quiet Revolution

In less than a decade there has been a quiet revolution, still largely unrecognised by policy-makers. We now have to hand new approaches, behaviours and methods which enable those who are poor and marginalised, whether or not they are literate, to express and analyse their realities. These approaches, behaviours and methods often carry the label PRA, which originally stood for Participatory Rural Appraisal. The first applications were rural: in natural resource management, community action plans, agriculture, health, water and poverty programmes; but events have overtaken the "rural" as applications have spread to towns and cities, to organisations, to policy, and to personal and institutional change; and "appraisal" does not describe the applications in planning, action, monitoring and evaluation. PRA has spread to most countries in the world, and from the South (where it originated) to the North. PRA-related networks have been established in most of the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. In Africa, as elsewhere, a growing community of experienced PRA practitioners and trainers is sharing and spreading participatory approaches. Compared with older, less participatory, approaches to learning and action, PRA tends to shift its enquiry from closed to open, its interactions from individuals to groups, and its methods from verbal to visual and from measuring to comparing. Above all, there is a shift from the normal dominating and teaching behaviour of outsiders, to convening and facilitating: sitting down, listening, watching, and often keeping quiet (Kumar 1996). Much that is called PRA is badly done. But well facilitated, it has demonstrated unexpected capabilities in local people to present their realities and to conduct their own analysis; and has shown that those realities often add to and differ from what professionals have believed.

Participatory Poverty Assessments

Among the most exciting and important applications has been a series of Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs). These have been undertaken using PRA approaches, behaviours and methods in Ghana, Zambia, Mozambique, South Africa and Tanzania, with related approaches also used in other exercises in Kenya and Tanzania. The objective has been to enable poor people to analyse their realities and identify their priorities, and then to present these to policy-makers, leading to pro-poor changes in policy and practice. The approaches have differed with commonalities. In all countries the teams to carry out the PPAs have received substantial PRA training. In the most recent PPA, in Shinyanga Region in Tanzania, training was for three weeks followed by residence in representative villages facilitating PRA for another three weeks. In Ghana, Zambia, Mozambique and Tanzania, the PRA process was similar in different communities; in South Africa, NGOs and researchers specialised in sectors and subjects according to their contacts and competences. In South Africa and recently in Tanzania, an ingenious and effective card sorting technique has been evolved for the analysis of the huge amounts of information generated through PRA, using categories not from professionals' realities but from those of poor people.

Some of the main insights and findings to date can be outlined under five headings: concepts of wellbeing; who are the poor; the seasonality of deprivation; sectoral priorities; and specifics of pro-poor policies. What follows cannot be more than a light and selective sketch, and cannot do justice to the richness, variety and depth of the findings.

Concepts of Wellbeing

Again and again, and not only in Africa, the technique originally known as wealth ranking has been converted by local people into what can more accurately be described as wellbeing ranking. In this PRA method, cards with household names are sorted into piles, and then the reasons elicited why individual cards have been placed where they are. Most people do this according to some composite local concept of the good and bad life. In Luganda this can be *embeera n'obulama bwabantu*

(roughly, conditions of day-to-day life of the people), and in Swahili *hali ya maisha* (roughly, conditions of living and being). Outsiders' reductionist professional concepts like income or consumption as means to measure a poverty line then appear crude compared with local people's composite judgements of wellbeing, often as these do weighing and conflating many different considerations. Among positive characteristics commonly seen as contributing to wellbeing are food security, health, love and good relations in the family, and being respected, and among negative characteristics sickness or being disabled, drunkenness, and discord in the family. Income may not be mentioned, or may be treated as relatively unimportant (for examples see Chambers 1997: 176-9). Criteria usually differ by gender. Nor do wealth and wellbeing correspond, one for one. In one village in the Shinyanga PPA, men sorted household cards into three piles for wealth, and then again into three piles for wellbeing: while the top pile for wealth had 15 cards, the top pile for wellbeing had 50. Wellbeing ranking, and the ranking of priorities by disadvantaged groups, thus reveals poor people's own concepts of the good and bad life, and can lead to a fresh look at policies and priorities.

Who are the Poor?

Those who are worst off in communities are readily identified in PPAs. The gender dimension of disadvantage and poverty comes across strongly, especially with widows, old women, abandoned women, and women with drunken or violent husbands. Other categories include the disabled (blind, lame, crippled, mentally disturbed, chronically ill...), orphans, and the aged, besides more obviously those with few material possessions or sources of food or income. In the PPA in Shinyanga Region of Tanzania (Shinyanga 1997/8) it became evident that major improvements in wellbeing for women and also for men could flow from an end to drunken husbands beating their wives.² One implication is the critical importance of social relations and support within communities for those who are most disadvantaged, and especially women. A huge policy question, which Governments might do well to take more frontally, is what a Government can do to improve gender relations in households in local communities.

Seasonal Dimensions of Deprivation

The seasonal dimensions of deprivation are habitually underperceived by urban-based professionals, themselves largely season-proofed and prone to travelling in rural areas in the good times of dry seasons after harvest, rather than in the bad times of the rains. The PPAs have brought to light the multiple interactions of adverse factors during the rains such as sickness, hard work, debt, isolation, and shortages of food and other necessities. The seasonalities of hunger, child labour, school absenteeism, drunkenness, domestic violence, vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases, and expenditures on different items are among the dimensions described. One implication is how to enable professionals more clearly to perceive, and more effectively to mitigate, seasonal deprivations.

Sectoral Priorities

The World Bank Task Manager for the Zambia PPA found priority ranking exercises provided extremely valuable insights when addressing issues of cross-sectoral balance...consistent messages were generated from these exercises which created a convincing composite picture of the priorities of rural and urban poor in relation to public policy (Norton and Stephens 1995: 15).

Generalisations must be tentative, but PPAs so far have tended to show that poor rural people value health services more than education, and are acutely aware of the link between illhealth and poverty. The practical implication is for much wider use of PPAs to inform cross-sectoral balance, and sectoral policies themselves.

Policy Strategies

These bald summaries cannot do justice to the richness of the insights generated by well-conducted PPAs. They have a potential of bringing

home to policy-makers the realities of deprivation and the implications of their decisions. They can identify issues for further investigation. They can also point to measures which may be low cost but high in improvements in the wellbeing of poor people according to their realities and criteria. Some of these may require substantial capital and recurrent expenditure, as sometimes with

- all-weather roads for access to medical treatment and markets during the rains
- efforts to ensure effective curative health services during the rains where this entails a larger supply of drugs

Others may be low cost, for example:

- changing the timing of payment of school expenses. In Zambia, payment of school expenses coincides with the rains and Christmas: the time of year when poor people are shortest of money. (When a similar adverse pattern was revealed in the Gambia, also through a PRA process, the Government changed the timing. Although multiple causation is likely, there followed a rise in the enrolments of girls in primary education) (Kane et al 1998)
- adjusting the timing of the school year in relation to agricultural demands for children's labour. (This is not a new idea. Decades ago the school year in Uganda was adjusted for the cotton harvest. PPAs can bring home sharply the need and benefits from such changes)
- training and encouraging all Government staff to be friendly, polite and welcoming to poor people. (Rudeness of medical staff is repeatedly cited as a deterrent to poor people going for treatment for sickness and accidents)
- support for and reinforcement of traditional healers, especially where the rains are times of isolation and sickness
- providing authoritative information about rights and entitlements.³ In the South African PPA, someone said: "We don't know what we

can ask for, we don't know who to ask, and we don't know how to ask".

A Vision for the Future

Participatory methods, and especially their application through PPAs, inspire a vision of a future in which the realities of those who are poor and deprived would be much more accessible, and much more influential on those who make and execute policy, whether political leaders, officials, or donor agency staff, to name only three of the more obvious groups. For this to occur, cynics might say it would be necessary to change human nature. More modestly, and realistically, two practical thrusts can be suggested: multiplying and improving PPAs and participatory thematic studies a pedagogy for the non-oppressed who have the power to make changes

(I) Multiplying and Improving

The learning curve with PPAs remains steep. Much remains to be learnt and shared, for example concerning

- PRA training of PPA teams,
- fieldwork recording and reporting,
- analysis and synthesis of findings,
- engaging policy-makers,
- achieving actual policy change,
- achieving actual good changes on the ground.

A study in Ghana (Agyarko 1997), and the experience in Zambia (Milimo et al 1998), indicate that one of the main initial benefits from PPAs can be the PRA-related capabilities developed in a country, which

can then be deployed on follow-up sectoral and thematic studies. There is a huge potential for multiplying PPAs at both national and subnational levels, not least in conjunction with decentralisation and institutionalising participation in Government and other organisations (Blackburn with Holland 1998). This becomes increasingly feasible as PRA facilitation capabilities thicken up. The regional PPA in process in 1997/8 in Shinyanga in Tanzania may be a precursor of other such activities. The growing community of national networks for PRA (IDS 1998 continuing) and participatory methodologies can contribute through identifying and training facilitators and trainers.

(II) A Pedagogy for the Non-Oppressed⁴

Conducting PPAs and thematic studies is the easier half. More difficult is to secure changes in policies (or policy-in-principle) and practice (or policy-in-practice, what actually happens on the ground). The question is how to enable policy-makers and implementers to focus on, and act on, the perspectives and expressed priorities of poor people. The crux is actual good changes in policy and practice. Strategies for such changes deserve priority for action research and learning. Many reasons can always be identified, vested interests, corruption, inefficiency, lack of resources, and so on, to suggest that change cannot occur. At the same time, there are many people committed to pro-poor policies and practice, or capable of becoming so committed. The challenge is then how to inform, support and multiply such people in the context of insights into the needs and priorities of the poor. Four initial suggestions can be made. Any full pedagogy for the non-oppressed should contain many more:

- enable senior and middle-level policy-makers to take part in PPAs and thematic studies, to learn through them, and to own the insights and outputs. In Guinea, appraisals which engaged officials as fieldworkers transformed their view of land tenure, leading them to recognise its complexity and diversity (Freudenberger 1998) and later to argue on the basis on that knowledge,

- enable local people to present their realities convincingly. This can be verbally, or visually through photographs and video which they take, through diagrams, and through slides,
- encourage or require senior people to spend a week or more in a poor and remote village, or slum. Under James Wolfensohn's leadership this has become policy in the World Bank, with encouraging initial results; but to my knowledge no other organisation has followed suit. Why not? Here is a practice crying out to be embraced by the IMF,
- in every policy-making committee or group appoint two persons, one to represent women, children, the aged, and others who are poor and excluded, and one to represent future generations. Their tasks would be to imagine themselves in the realities of their constituents, to reflect on the consequences for them of whatever was proposed, and to argue on their behalf. Those representing the disadvantaged could draw on the insights of PPAs, and would indeed do well to have taken part in PPAs as part of their preparation. In the end, what matters is personal insight and commitment.

Colin Leys wrote decades ago about the primacy of politics. Within politics, one finds the personal. Chaos theory refreshingly restores confidence in the scope for individual action making a difference. So now we can disaggregate, and recognise the primacy of the personal, in politics and in policy-making. What happens, for better or worse, largely results from the interactions of innumerable personal decisions. We need now a pedagogy for the non-oppressed, meaning those with power. We need to find ways to help the powerful unlearn and learn, putting them in more direct touch with the realities of those who are poor and excluded. Pioneered in Sub-Saharan Africa, PPAs and participatory thematic studies provide one new and promising way towards this.

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Notes

¹ The original version of this paper presented in October 1997 has been lightly edited and updated in June 1998. Developments have included further experience gained from a PPA in Shinyanga Region, Tanzania, and progress with proposals for further PPAs in Kenya and Uganda. A substantial review (Hanmer et al 1997) has analysed what can be learnt from the World Bank's poverty assessments in Sub-Saharan Africa, including PPAs. The Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, has produced a topic pack on PPAs (Agyarko and Humphrey April 1998) which brings together materials and reflections on PPAs, and which is available on request. David Booth, Jesko Hentschel, Alicia Herbert, Jeremy Holland and Peter Lanjouw have submitted a draft review entitled "Participation and Combined Methods in African Poverty Assessment: renewing the Agenda" to the Department for International Development of the British Government and the World Bank. For sources on PRA see RRA Notes 1988- (now PLA Notes); Mascarenhas et al 1991; Absalom et al 1995; Chambers 1997 chapters 6 and 7 and references; and abstracts of PRA-related materials and specialised topic packs available from PRA, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK.

Sources include: for Ghana, Norton, Kroboe, Bortei-Dorkju and Dogbe 1995, and Dogbe 1998; for Zambia, Norton, Owen and Milimo 1994, and Milimo, Norton and Owen 1998; for Mozambique, Owen 1998; and for South Africa, May et al 1997 and Attwood and May 1998. For overviews see Norton and Stephens 1995, Chambers with Blackburn 1996, and Robb in preparation, and for other sources Holland with Blackburn 1998.

² In one village where the PPA team stayed for three weeks a revisit six months later was told by women that the beating had ceased.

³ Entitlements here is used in its normal dictionary sense, which includes what a person has a right to claim, and not in the specialised senses associated with the work of Amartya Sen.

⁴ With apologies to Paulo Freire for adapting his title *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970).

THE POLITICS & REPORTING OF DEVOLUTION: SCOTLAND & KENYA

Kwendo Opanga

Kenya belongs to the so-called developing world. Scotland is part of the United Kingdom, Kenya's former colonial mother country, that is part of the so-called developed North. Kenya's leading newspaper group, the *Nation*, was founded in 1960 and publishes five titles: *Daily Nation*, *Sunday Nation*, *The East African* and their sister Swahili titles *Taifa Leo* and *Taifa Jumapili*.

Andrew Neil, a former editor of the London-based Rupert Murdoch-owned *Sunday Times* for eleven years, now edits *The Scotsman*, its Sunday sister title, *Scotland on Sunday* and *The European*. *The Scotsman* was founded in 1817 and, for a long time, some say as long as 300 years, the issue of devolution has been kept alive by the politicians and media in Scotland.

Briefly, in 1963, Kenya experimented with devolution of government and then the idea seemed dead and buried as the centralist party, Kanu, entrenched itself in power. But, seemingly out of the blue, the matter was to come up in 1991 and the debate was to persist through 1994, but Kenyans did not get a chance to express their feelings on the matter in a poll. Is there room for comparison between the *Scotsman's* and the *Nation's* coverage of the debate on devolution? This should be clear at the end of this brief paper.

Proponents of devolution argue that it is all about taking services closer to the governed. That in itself suggests that those who seek devolution of power or services have grouses against centralised authority. They may feel they are not getting their rightful share or that the centre is remote and alien and, therefore, decisions taken in their name are arbitrary and not representative of their feelings.

As for the media, both print and broadcast, on the important, crucial or controversial issues of the day, such as whether or not to devolve